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# CINEMA EDITOR

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US \$5.95 / Canada \$8.95  
QTR 4 / 2012 / VOL 62



The common perception among film editors is that computer animation editors basically just cut the heads and tails off the shots and drop them in. This could not be further from the truth but probably stems from the early Disney days of cell animation when the ‘cutter’ was uninvolved in the choice or even the length of shots. The editor’s role was dramatically reinvented on *Toy Story*, the first computer animated feature film. John Lasseter—the visionary director and animator who co-founded Pixar Studios—told editor Lee Unkrich, A.C.E., that he wanted the film cut like live action not like a cartoon. Soon Unkrich became an invaluable collaborator on this pioneering team and his knowledge of both film technique and innovative non-linear technology facilitated the precedent-setting involvement of Pixar editors.

When Nicholas C. Smith went to work at Pixar Studios he had the same misconception many editors have about the nature of the job and, because he had edited over 30 feature films, his observations about the differences between editing live action and computer animation are particularly astute. His journey on *Brave* was also the longest of any Pixar editor, all of which provided compelling material for our panel discussion at EditFest LA this past August.

Smith began by telling the EditFest audience about his first experience, helping out on *Finding Nemo*. He was shown a storyboard reel and told us, “I saw the timeline and the amount of work that was involved, sound work especially. I was kind of shocked.” He soon realized that the editor is part of the writing process along with the director, story supervisor, and artists. Smith said, “You can rewrite, redraw, reconceive, throw everything out and start all over again,” yet with every iteration, the editors were recutting dialogue, sound effects and music that accompanied those boards. He ended up editing 26 versions of one scene over the course of six weeks. Smith realized he was freed up from the walls an editor hits in live action, where one has to manipulate within the confines of a script and triage predetermined footage. The studio’s ethos of perfectionism and determination also required in Smith a newfound level of stamina and patience.



# TALES FROM A PIXAR CUTTING ROOM

The *Brave* Journey of Nicholas C. Smith, A.C.E.

BY BOBBIE O’STEEN

When Smith became lead editor on *Brave*, after working as an additional editor on *Cars* and *Ratatouille* and as second editor on *WALL•E*, he was “really in the thick of it,” he said, having many story meetings with the director, story artists, and producers. There were also screenings for Brain Trust, a small group of creative leaders at Pixar who oversee development on all movies, which included other directors, along with screenings for the Pixar population. “You have a lot of voices in your head,” Smith revealed, something that he and his director had to wade through. The flood of notes is

not unusual at Pixar nor is the change in directors during the course of production. However, on *Brave*, there was a clear shift from a feminine to masculine sensibility in the transition from directors Brenda Chapman to Mark Andrews and Smith felt responsible to do his best in melding both of their visions. The extended release date was due to scheduling logistics but meant that Smith was on the film for five and a half years, time that allowed for a lot of tweaking. He showed the EditFest audience some mind-boggling statistics: 84,421 boards were delivered to editorial, 160 scenes were boarded, and only 36

scenes remained in the film. By contrast, *Toy Story 3* had only one boarded scene that didn't end up in the film. "They were very efficient," Smith said, "part of that was they had to get it out in three years."

The first footage we screened was shown to a preview audience at a typical state of progression: one-third storyboard, one-third layout, and one-third animation. Director Andrews' voiceover narration described the three stages, starting with storyboards "indicated by a wide variety of rough and finished drawings," then layout where "sets, camera movements and character choreography are roughly represented," and animation "in varying stages of completion."

The heavy lifting for the editor takes place during the storyboard stage, where Smith lived for three years. We decided to show the EditFest audience mostly footage from this stage: a two-dimensional, black and white world. Part of this process is very messy. They're writing, drawing and editing very fast, constantly experimenting. "What I'm showing you here is a lot like dirty laundry," was Smith's caveat. But it is also a window into a process that has not been shown, to this degree, before any audience. We saw that some boards were shaded and more detailed, while other sketches were quite primitive. Smith confirmed that it took a while to get used to the minimal information gleaned when

cutting boards. He also explained that these boards are not just beat boards, like special effects boards, which show where the camera should be. "You're creating shots," said Smith. "You might have ten boards that make up one shot, and when you need to trim stuff you have to take a frame off each board" and adjust audio on 16 tracks to maintain sync.

Smith chose several sequences that were reworked the most, some having up to 50 iterations. He started with the opening, which set up *Brave*'s unique fairy tale about a royal family in 10th century Scotland, focusing on the wonderfully feisty Merida—Pixar's first female protagonist—and her relationship with her mother. A montage of storyboards showed drawings of Merida's and her mother's hands working on a tapestry, revealing Merida's growth and the breaking down of their relationship. The problem was the audience wasn't seeing their faces or who they were as a family. The next version showed the family but with the father in competition with the mother. Then Andrews came on the film and stripped it down to just the father hunting and fighting a fearsome bear. The final animated version that followed displayed how Andrews and Smith were able to take the bones of Chapman's story, embracing those emotions, while fleshing it out "by," as Smith put it, "answering a lot of issues that were rolling about." The most problematic sequence required setting up the witch's character and not making her into a fairytale stereotype. This was fully animated then went back to storyboard stage; and we saw different incarnations that demonstrated how the evolution of a Pixar sequence is not linear but often a combination of storyboards, layout, and animation.

Smith also discussed the change from scratch to production dialogue, making possible adjustments from what are usually temporary recordings to the performances of professional actors who are hired as much as two years into the storyboard stage. One can get used to, or even fall in love with, a scratch voice the way one does with temp music which happened when *Brave* co-director Steve Purcell recorded the original witch and pitched up his voice. There are also no production tracks, so something as simple as an actor breathing or hiccupping doesn't exist. In the actors'



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recording sessions assistants pull out sounds that might be needed later to make it feel like a live track, one example of the immense media management assistants have to engage in. In addition, actors at Pixar rarely record their dialogue in a room together, so the editor cannot experience the natural rhythm of the actors' back-and-forth as a guide for intercutting. Another luxury the Pixar editor does not have is the opportunity to study actors' expressions, finding the little tics and movements in their faces that sometimes motivate the cuts. Instead, Smith said, "You have to imagine and listen to the dialogue very carefully for clues."

On the other hand, Pixar editors have unlimited flexibility when working with sound and seem to be challenged on every film with a particular kind of vocalization. On *Brave* it was the bear 'voices,' particularly when the mother is transformed into a bear by the witch's spell. Bears have very limited vocal range and the idea was to give Mom/bear some human intonations without having her sound like Scooby-Doo. Smith showed us before-and-after versions where this effect was achieved with the help of sound

designers, along with a timeline revealing the intricacy of his track work.

The editor also has unusual input in the layout stage, where the director of photography and layout artists are blocking out the scene and setting camera moves on a virtual set. Smith says, "The editor tries to match the boards, that's the jump-off point, but if you have a good relationship with the director and layout guys you will try new things." There are also constant adjustments that editors have to make from the storyboard stage; but they are able to ask for additional coverage, such as different angles or closer shots. However, editors do not have continuous coverage of, say, a master or over-the-shoulder shot that they can cut to when needed. "You get the length of the board and not much more," so Smith found himself frequently saying, "Give me handles, give me handles."

Certain roles editors normally have to navigate become exaggerated at Pixar, such as that of the reality-checker. Being the sober reminder of what best serves the story can be daunting, given the dazzling level of talent and enthusiasm invested in each stage of production. The ability to keep

a fresh perspective is also tested at Pixar. Because the editor spends so many years on the film and because the minutiae are huge, the editor has "to try not to get lost in it," as Smith revealed, "and dig deeper to remember what your initial reaction was."

The last sequence we screened was something Smith edited for EditFest, showing him working on the Avid while director Andrews sits beside him, drawing boards for a sequence that Smith is in the middle of editing. In another room, we see an actress recording scratch dialog. Cut back to Smith at the Avid editing the actress' dialogue in. Smith explains that, "It's very fluid in the sense that you can change things immediately."

This final footage encapsulates what is inspiring about Pixar Studios, that it is a close knit, creative community where the editor has a voice in many aspects of the production. The cutting room operates at the hub of all the dizzying possibilities that the virtual world provides, with thousands of bits of media coming in and out every day. However, the editor's workplace also represents a solid base, where the classic principles of storytelling and the editor's role in those are fully valued. 